Family-friendly science

At first I tried to follow that admonition. I defended my thesis with spit up on my blouse while my 8-month-old daughter waited in the hallway with a babysitter. I lugged her to field sites, carrying her on my back while wading into ponds to collect data on frog populations.

But over time, this approach wore me out. I was both disappointed in myself for not being productive enough in my research and frustrated that I wasn't spending enough time enjoying my family. I lost my confidence and started looking for excuses to leave science. I watched jobs and fellowships go by because I doubted my qualifications. After 2 years as a postdoc living off a salary that couldn't cover day care costs, I took a year off to re-evaluate my plans and goals.

In those long days at home, I gradually realized how much I had let the stereotype of the scientist who sacrifices family life define me. There I was, Mama Ph.D., desperately trying to keep myself busy with projects around the house while my intellectual skills—writing, data analysis, critical thinking—went to waste. I decided I’d rather be a scientist whose kids affect her work than not be a scientist at all.

I jumped back into the workforce as an adjunct professor teaching biology. I found a scientist-mom mentor who fought for me, making sure I wouldn’t get taken advantage of as an adjunct or as a woman. Her support also helped inspire me to get back into research by starting a new postdoc, and for the first time to feel confident in my work.

Over the next 3 years, I juggled teaching, research, and being a mom (among other things). I was surprised to find that being a scientist was actually very conducive to raising kids. I took advantage of the flexible hours of an academic scientist to spend time with my family, and I was also lucky to have on-site child care facilities and an endless supply of babysitters living across the street from my house. At the same time, being a parent improved my science. I learned to plan more efficient experiments and to think more carefully about which questions were really worth pursuing. My daughter became my favorite field assistant, helping me scour the woods for salamanders to study.

But it wasn’t until a colleague asked me whether I would be applying for a recently announced tenure-track position that I realized how much scientific and professional progress I had made in those years juggling research and motherhood. With her encouragement I applied, and glowingly showed off my 8-month pregnancy bump during an on-campus interview for my current job as an assistant professor.

My life now is a true merging of research and family. It happens in small moments, such as when a sick day turns into an impromptu “let’s see what we can find under the microscope” day. Other times my double life results in epic adventures, for example when I co-led an undergraduate course in the Costa Rican rainforest while pregnant with my second child, with my daughter and scientist-husband by my side. I now know how misguided those thoughts and “advice” in grad school were. In letting my kids affect my research, I learned not only that it is possible to balance being a scientist with having children, but also that doing so benefits both our children and our science.

Amanda Zellmer is an assistant professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles, California. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
Family-friendly science
Amanda Zellmer

Science 354 (6315), 1070.
DOI: 10.1126/science.354.6315.1070